

Archaeological Services

INTRODUCTION

An evaluation excavation was carried out by Lindsey Archaeological Services at the site of the North Valley Road in advance of construction of a new school building for the Caistor Grammar School under instruction from P.B. Lawrence and Associates.

The proposed development lies adjacent to the Roman walls (Scheduled Ancient Monument) which lie within an Area of Archaeological Interest declared by Great Lindsey District Council in 1989.

The remaining wall at the south end of the site was not included in the present investigation because it lies within the scheduled area and requires Scheduled Monument Consent before any work can be carried out. However, a photographic record was taken and a detailed recording is required at this site.

CAISTOR GRAMMAR SCHOOL Archaeological Evaluation

Caistor is situated on the Caistor High Street, overlooking the Ancholice valley and in the Roman period was the most important settlement in the northern part of the Lincolnshire Wolds.

The Caistor High Street was an important prehistoric route which, during the Roman period, assumed a military function as well. Caistor was one of a number of Roman settlements, some of which had originated in the Iron Age, stretching from the Humber (south) north through to the Wash (via the River Eain at Horncastle). In the early Roman period the route was protected by two forts at Kirmington (which lies in a gap in the walls) and in the late 3rd century military defences were constructed at Horncastle.

The Roman walls at Caistor have been compared with those at Horncastle although their function is not yet known. They enclose an irregular polygon about 160 x 230m in size. Bastions have been recorded at several of the corners.

An archaeological excavation in 1939 located the Roman wall foundations at the south west corner of the circuit and a survey of the surviving wall fragments was made (Fig. 1). Although a few small excavations were carried out in the 1960s little has been recorded in the town and understanding of the settlement and its function has barely advanced in past thirty years.

Very little is known about the period following the collapse of the Roman Empire. There is no information from Caistor itself but a cemetery cemetery dating to the 6th century was

LINDSEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SERVICES

FRANCIS HOUSE SILVER BIRCH PARK GREAT NORTHERN TERRACE LINCOLN LN5 8LG

CAISTOR GRAMMAR SCHOOL Archaeological Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

An evaluation excavation was carried out by Lindsey Archaeological Services at Varlow's Yard, North Kelsey Road in advance of construction of a new teaching block for the Caistor Grammar School under instruction from D.B. Lawrence and Associates.

The proposed development lies adjacent to the Roman walls (Scheduled Ancient Monument 148) and within an Area of Archaeological Interest defined by West Lindsey District Council in 1989.

The retaining wall at the south end of the site was not included in the present investigation because it lies within the scheduled area and requires Scheduled Monument Consent before any work can be carried out. However, a photographic record was made of the wall in case more detailed recording is required at a later date.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ROMAN AND SAXON CAISTOR

Caistor is situated on the Caistor High Street, overlooking the Ancholme valley and in the Roman period was the most important settlement in the northern part of the Lincolnshire Wolds.

The Caistor High Street was an important prehistoric route which, during the Roman period, assumed a military function as well. Caistor was one of a number of Roman settlements, some of which had originated in the Iron Age, stretching from the Humber (South Ferriby) through to the Wash (via the River Bain at Horncastle). In the early Roman period the route was protected by two forts at Kirmington (which lies in a gap in the wolds) and in the late 3rd century military defences were constructed at Horncastle.

The Roman walls at Caistor have been compared with those at Horncastle although their function is not yet known. They encompass an irregular polygon about 160 x 255m in size. Bastions have been recorded at several of the angles.

An archaeological excavation in 1959 located the Roman wall foundations at the south west corner of the circuit and a survey of the surviving wall fragments was made (Fig. 1). Although a few small excavations were carried out in the 1960s little has been recorded in the town and understanding of the settlement and its function has barely advanced in past thirty years.

Even less is known about the period following the collapse of the Roman Empire. There is no information from Caistor itself but a cremation cemetery dating to the 6th century was

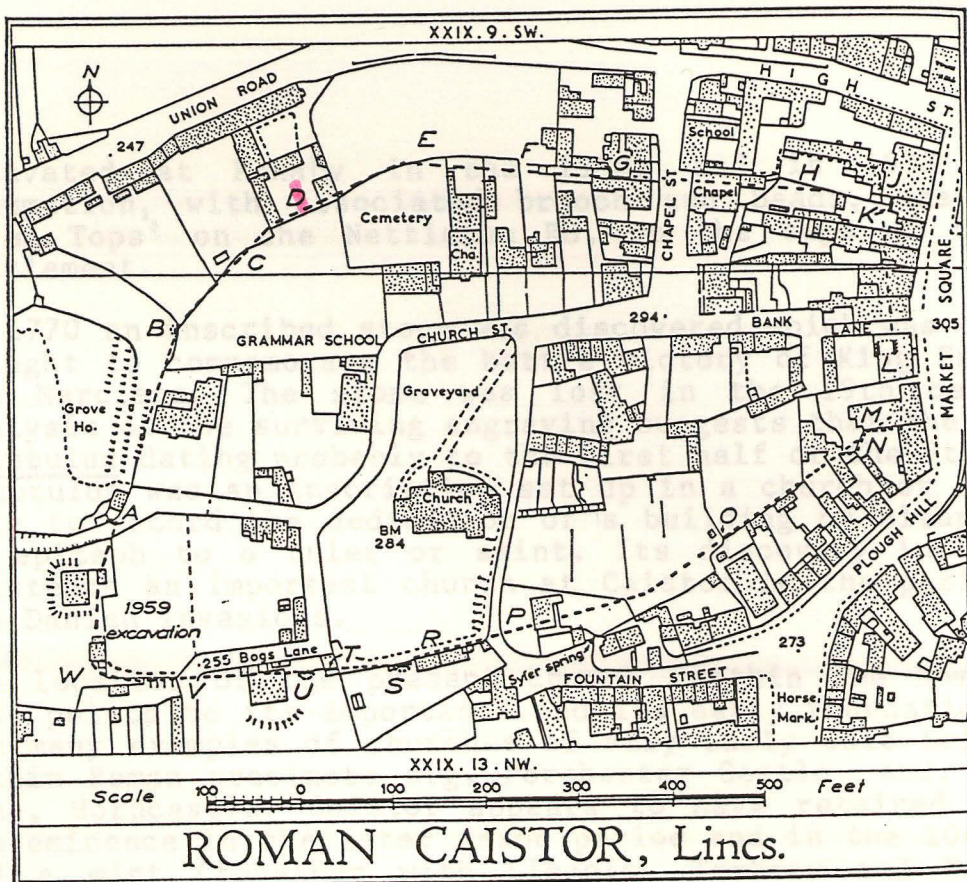


Fig.1 Caistor Roman walls. Location of excavation September 1992 (red) (From P.Rahtz, 1960)

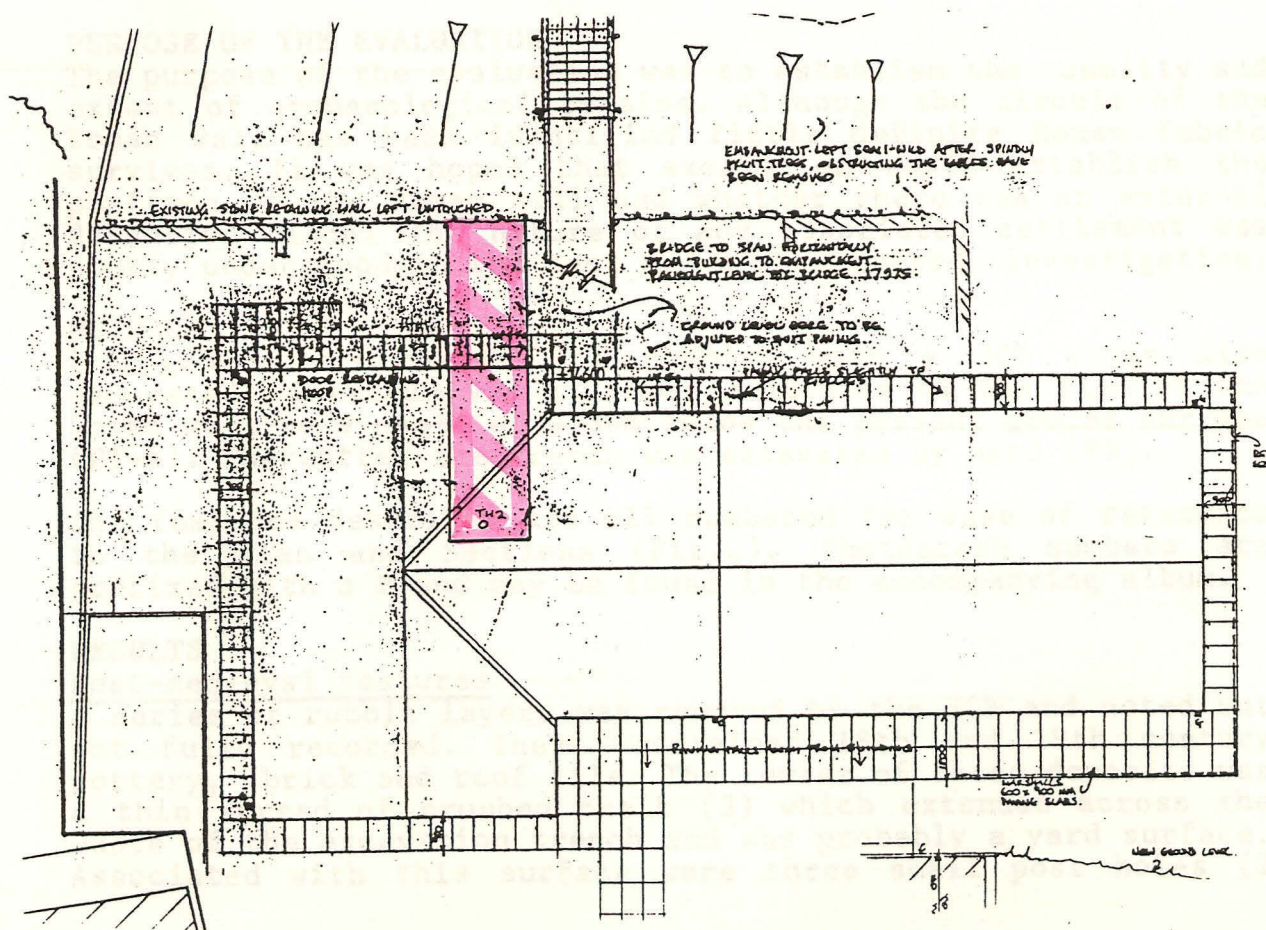


Fig.1a Location of excavation trench in relation to proposed building (architect's plan)

excavated at Fonaby in the 1950s and in 1972 a single inhumation, with associated brooch and beads, was found at 'Tree Tops' on the Nettleton Rd, on the edge of the modern settlement.

In 1770 an inscribed stone was discovered which was originally thought to commemorate the battle victory of King Egbert over the Mercians. The stone was lost in the 19th century but analysis of the surviving engraving suggests that the stone was a tutulus dating probably to the first half of the 9th century. A tutulus was an inscription set up in a church or other holy site to record the dedication of a building or altar, to form an epitaph to a ruler or saint. Its discovery indicates the existence an important church at Caistor in the period before the Danish invasions.

The location of the present church, within the Roman walls, also points to its importance and its early foundation. There are many examples of churches of very early date being placed within Roman precincts e.g. Porchester Castle and, closer to home, Horncastle. Caistor appears to have retained its local pre-eminence in the later Saxon period and in the 10th century had a mint (together with Lincoln, Torksey and Horncastle) which means it must have been part of a royal estate. The manor (estate) was still held by the monarch (King Edward the Confessor) at the time of the Norman Conquest.

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of the evaluation was to establish the quality and extent of archaeological remains. Although the circuit of the Roman wall has been identified little definite Roman fabric survives. It was hoped that excavation would establish the position of the Roman wall and whether there was an external defensive ditch. The nature of any associated settlement was poorly understood in the past and also required investigation.

METHOD

The ground was cleared of rubbish with a JCB which also excavated a trench 9.3 x 2m perpendicular to the line of the Roman wall to a depth of 0.30m below the present ground surface (P1-4). Thereafter the trench was excavated by hand (P5).

The features described are all numbered for ease of reference to the Plan and Sections (Fig.2). Photograph numbers are prefixed with a P and may be found in the accompanying album.

RESULTS

Post-medieval features

A series of rubble layers was removed by the JCB and noted but not fully recorded. They contained 18th and 19th century pottery, brick and roof tile. The lowest of these deposits was a thin spread of crushed chalk (3) which extended across the whole of the excavation trench and was probably a yard surface. Associated with this surface were three small post holes (2

(P6), 15 and 18 (P7)) which contained the rotted remains of timber posts, possibly for wood partitions in the yard. At the north end of the trench was a rectangular pit (20) filled with brick rubble and of unknown function.

The south end of the trench butted a stone retaining wall (28) which was 2.85m high and formed the yard boundary. The ground level to the south was flush with the top of the wall and the wall was thought to represent the line of the Roman wall around the town. Excavation immediately beneath the wall revealed the bottom of a shallow foundation trench (26/27 (P8)) which was 0.50m wide and survived to a depth of only 0.20m beneath the 19th century yard surfaces. The bottom of this wall is only three courses below the present ground level. The difference in ground levels to the north and south of this wall must mean that it marks the line of the Roman wall. However, it is not clear if the present facing is Roman. There were no finds in the foundation trench and the archaeological evidence only shows that the wall was constructed prior to the 19th century yard surfaces.

Anglo-Saxon features

A series of inter-cutting pits and gullies were found immediately below the chalk surface 3(P9). These deposits were quite complex and in the short time available were not fully recorded.

At least five pits (29 (P10-11), 31 (P11), 32 (P13-14), 54 (P12), 58 and 59 (P13-14)) were identified in section but their exact extent was not determined. There were also two linear features, gullies or ditches 42 and 57. The latest of these features was the gully 42 which lay close to the south edge of the trench and ran parallel to the wall 28. Most of its fill comprised layers of yellowish clay with rubble (P15). The earliest pit in the sequence was 58 but little survived because it had been dug into by the gully 57 and pits 32 and 59. Pottery from gully 57 was 9-10th century in date (P16, left hand side). Most of the finds from these features comprised animal bone but the few sherds of pottery mostly dated to the 9-11th centuries (with a few residual Roman and early Saxon sherds).

Provisional interpretation of these features is that most were late Saxon rubbish pits at the rear of a property or properties. It was clear from the excavated section that the tops of the late Saxon features had been truncated during levelling operations in the yard in the 19th century. Deposits from the intervening centuries did not survive.

Roman Features

Beneath the Saxon pits was a much deeper and wider feature comprising mainly yellowish clay with small pieces of ironstone rubble (P17-20). It was difficult to distinguish the fill from the natural clay except for the occasional piece of mortar or

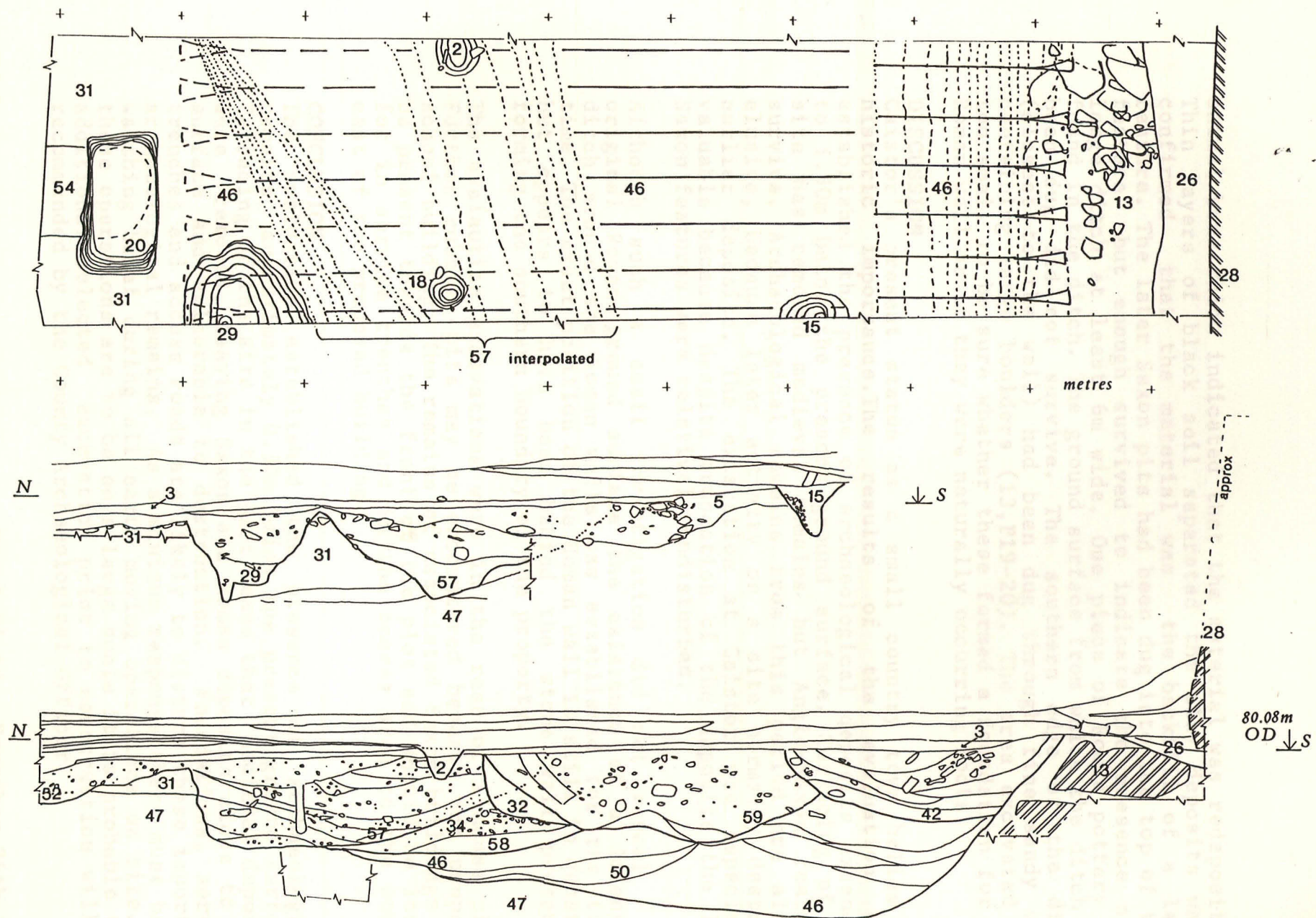


Fig. 2 Excavation plan and sections (M.Clark)

animal bone which indicated that the material was redeposited. Thin layers of black soil separated the clay deposits which confirmed that the material was the backfill of a large feature. The later Saxon pits had been dug into the top of this feature but enough survived to indicate the presence of a large ditch at least 6m wide. One piece of Roman pottery was found in the ditch. The ground surface from which the ditch had been dug did not survive. The southern edge of the ditch (closest to the wall) had been dug through fine sandy clay containing large boulders (13,P19-20). The area excavated was too small to be sure whether these formed a foundation for the Roman wall or if they were naturally occurring rocks.

DISCUSSION

Caistor's present status as a small country town belies its historic importance. The results of the evaluation have established the presence of archaeological deposits extending to 1.80m below the present ground surface. Terracing of the site has removed medieval remains but Anglo-Saxon features survive. Archaeological remains from this period are always elusive, because later activity on a site normally destroys earlier deposits. The excavation at Caistor was especially valuable because despite truncation of the deposits the late Saxon features were relatively undisturbed.

Although such a small investigation did not reveal the original Roman ground surface the existence of a defensive ditch around the Roman walls was established for the first time. The exact position of the Roman wall is still in question but appears to have been behind the stone wall presently forming the southern boundary of the property.

The evaluation excavations were in the rear of a house plot. Further rubbish pits may be encountered beneath the proposed school building. The remains of associated Saxon buildings may be present towards the front of the plot and should be looked for in service trenches and in the access area to the north-east of the proposed building.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation established the presence of archaeological remains approximately 0.30m below the present ground surface. Terracing of the site in the past means that medieval deposits were removed, leaving Saxon and Roman deposits close to the surface and vulnerable to destruction. Foundations, service trenches and access roads are likely to disturb these important archaeological remains. As a minimum response there must be a watching brief during all earth moving operations on site. If these operations are to be on a large scale it is probable that additional selected excavation prior to construction will be recommended by the County Archaeological Officer.

Naomi Field November 25th 1992